The Fourth Church Pulpit

MYSTERY ON THE MOUNTAIN

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If one subjects everything to reason our religion will lose its mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principles of reason our religion will be absurd and ridiculous... There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in.

Blaise Pascal
Pensées

FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-9

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there;' ..."
Exodus 24:12 [NRSV]

The Bible is mostly the story of people living their lives, doing what people do, dealing with what comes at them in life, day after day, year after year, century after century. And, because it is mostly the story of people living their lives, the Bible has enough intrigue, love, hate, war, passion, betrayal, sex and violence to rival a pot-boiler TV mini-series. The story of David alone, Israel's favorite king and the many-times great-grandfather of Jesus, is a kind of ongoing soap opera.

But every now and then the Bible steps away from life and introduces us to mystery. It usually has something to do with a mountain and a mysterious sense of God and God's otherness and majesty and glory.

The two texts we heard this morning are about mystery. They push the edges of believability. They do not reduce to easy categories for analysis and explanation.

The first story comes from the edge of recorded history. The people of Israel have escaped from their captivity in Egypt. They have managed to get away from the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. They are headed north but no one except Moses, their leader, seems to know where they are headed or how long they will have to walk. They know there is a huge and forbidding wilderness in front of them, however. It is at this moment that the Bible says God invites Moses to a meeting on the top of a mountain.

The mountain is Mt. Sinai. Moses goes alone. God has called this meeting and is in charge of the agenda. When Moses gets to the top of the mountain, expecting — I assume — that he's going to see God, a very important thing happens. When Moses arrives at the summit, a cloud descends and Moses sits down and waits, in silence, for a week. And finally, after a week of silence, God speaks and Moses enters the cloud, meaning — I assume, and the Bible is consistent about this — Moses never really does see God.

A millennium-and-a-half later, the Bible takes us up another mountain. This time it's Jesus who does the inviting and initiating and is in charge of the agenda. Peter and James and John are invited to the mountaintop and what happens up there again pushes the edges of believability. Jesus' face shone like the sun, his clothes became dazzling: two figures out of the past appear. And suddenly, there is that cloud again and a voice and the disciples, understandably, have by now fallen to the ground in fear.

In her fine journal *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard reflects on the sense of mystery in nature and wrote:

> "I have never understood why so many mystics of all creeds experience the presence of God on mountaintops. Aren't they afraid of being blown away? ... It often feels best to lay low, inconspicuous, instead of waving your spirit around from high places like a lightning rod." [*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, p. 89]

The fact is the preacher is eager to get off that mountaintop as quickly as possible. I confess. This story comes up in the lectionary annually and is read throughout the world on this Sunday before Lent every year. I mostly ignore it because it is so mysterious, so non-reducible to my own intellectual and spiritual comfort level. I agree with Annie Dillard: you can get blown away on a mountain like that! And so every time I have attempted to preach about it over the years I have come down off that mountain as quickly as possible. You can actually preach a pretty good sermon about it because when Jesus and the disciples come down they walk right into a crowd of people and an epileptic son and his frantic father. So the church should not stay on the mountaintop but should come down into the valley of human suffering, etc., etc., all of which is good and true and important.

This time around, I decided to linger a while on the mountaintop, in the cloud, and I invite you to do the same.

What exactly is going on in these incidents? I think it is helpful to acknowledge that we're not sure. There was no one there with a camcorder. What we do know is that the experiences were very important for the people who were there, for their own faith, their courage, their commitment and their ability to live faithfully to the end. But what exactly was the nature of the experience?

Sometimes art helps when we run out of ways to explain something. There's a fine book by Peter Mathiessen, *The Snow Leopard*, which when I read it helped me a little with these stories of mystery on the mountain. Mathiessen is a Zen Buddhist with a deep sensitivity to the mystical. After his ex-wife died, he threw himself into covering a biological expedition in the high Himalayas of Tibet and Nepal to study the rare Himalayan Blue Sheep, and with the hope of seeing the extremely illusive Snow Leopard. Where there are Blue Sheep, there are usually Snow Leopards. Ancient Himalayan folklore believes that to see a Snow Leopard is to experience the Divine, to see God. So Mathiessen's adventure is, in reality, a journey of the heart and spirit, a quest for God.

One time the expedition becomes stranded at the end of the day and must spend the night at 17,000 feet. Keeping in my mind Moses' experience on Mt. Sinai, and the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, listen to an artist — painting a verbal picture:

> "At daybreak, when I peek out at a still universe, ice fills my nostrils. The spell of silence on this place is warning that no man belongs here. The Sherpas start down immediately: left alone, I am overtaken by that northern void — no wind, no cloud, no track, no bird, only the crystal crescents between the peaks.
>
> "I flush with feeling, moved beyond my comprehension, and once again warm tears freeze upon my face. These rocks and mountains, all this matter, the snow itself, the air — the earth is ringing. All is moving, full of power, full of light." [p. 173-4]

Like Moses on Sinai and the disciples on the mountain, unable to see clearly because of the cloud, the author never does see a Snow Leopard. But, again recalling the biblical stories, listen to him describe what he did experience:

> "Upstream, in the inner canyon, dark silences are deepened by the roar of stones. Something is listening, and I listen too: who is it that intrudes here? Who is breathing? ... I look about me ... who is it that spoke? Who is the ever-present 'I' that is not me?" [p. 135-6]

If you're still with me on the mountain I want to make two points, neither of them particularly simple.

The first is that these stories are artistic reminders of that basic affirmation of faith that there is more to reality than we can see or touch or even imagine. There is holiness, otherness, transcendence. There is ... God. We believe there is a God. We believe we are not alone in the universe. We believe there is an "'I' that is not me." The words come so easily we miss their enormity.

Philosophy knows how radical and enormous the basic affirmation is, how basic. Karl Jaspers, the philosopher said that "The transcendent cannot remain transcendent and yet become a knowable object." Centuries ago, Pascal warned about a religion that excludes human reason and one that depends totally on reason. To believe in God, the basic affirmation of faith, is to acknowledge that there is mystery, there are things we do not and will not understand, experiences that do not fit into neat categories and which we cannot explain. It is an acknowledgement of human limits, a confession of modesty before God's incomprehensible holy being.

Sometimes, curiously, it is religion that most readily forgets that basic point. As a matter of fact it is religion that regularly claims to know the whole truth of God and then sets out on a mission from God, a holy crusade, a *jihad*, to prove its point, whatever it takes.

One of my favorite theologians, Douglas John Hall, teaches something which religion regularly forgets, namely that we cannot possess the truth about God.

> "Hearing the voice of the One who declares, 'I am the Truth' we must be more consistently inclined than we have been toward modesty with respect to our own apprehension and comprehension of the Truth of God." [*Professing the Faith*, p. 71]

Listening to and participating recently in ongoing and never ending conversations about human sexuality — what the Bible says and doesn't say, what the Bible means and doesn't mean, what is good and right and normal and abnormal, rational, and responsible — my breath was taken away regularly by the way some folks have the truth, know the mind of God and the absolute confidence with which they are able to announce it to the rest of us.

Annie Dillard writes about it regularly. In a fine little book, *Holy the Firm*, she tells about attending a small, rural church, a church without much sense of order and no liturgy at all. She has a little fun with those of us who like our religion orderly, dignified, manageable and understandable.

> "The higher Christian churches — where, if anywhere, I belong — come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God."

The ancient church father, St. John Chrysostom, said something similar with admirable bluntness:

> "But that is an impertinence to say that he who is beyond the apprehension of even the higher powers can be comprehended by us earthworms ..." [Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, p. 179]

Back to Annie Dillard:

> "I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without them getting killed. In the high churches they saunter along the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger." [*Holy the Firm*, p.59]

The first point is that God — being God — is holy, transcendent, which means not altogether accessible to human reason: that religion which claims to know too much misses its main point, namely, that human life is lived out in the presence of that which is infinitely greater than itself: that we live in the midst of mystery and miracle, that there is more than we can touch and feel and understand, that the basic religious attitude is modesty, a confession of our limits and a consequent respect for and deference to one another, an acknowledgement that when it comes to matters of belief, or even matters of human mystery, like our sexuality for instance, we may not know God's truth with total precision. And it is the hopeful expectation that every now and then, not often — not at our initiative and not at all on our terms — you and I are invited by God to some mountaintop and there, in the cloud of mystery, we know and hear a voice say our name. And even if it happens only once, it is enough.

That's first, and the second point is almost its opposite, namely that we do know about God, not everything to be sure, but the very essence of Christian faith is that in Jesus Christ we have seen what we can of what God looks like and sounds like and acts like.

The disciples, on the other hand, heard a voice and it said: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased, listen to him!" [Matthew 17:5b]

What is unique about Christian faith is here. We believe that the transcendent, holy God has come close and has been revealed, has lived among us, has shown us how to live and love and relate and grow and become and die, as God's beloved children. What is uniquely Christian is the focusing of all the philosophic and theological abstractions in the One, this man.

Douglas John Hall wrote:

> "This truth is not an object but a living Subject. It is not an it, but a Thou. It is not words but a Word. It cannot be translated into words, only flesh." [Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 298]

The second point is that what is Christian about our religion is this man.

Sometimes when we tell the story we tell it as if Jesus were only the innocent victim of the historic human forces of injustice, greed, power and violence: a basically good man caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, a martyr. That voice on the mountain, however, or whatever it was they experienced, is the yearly reminder that God has a hand in the story of Jesus: that somehow God is involved when Jesus, in his passion, penetrates ever more deeply into the heart of human experience: that God is involved in the intrigue and pettiness, the injustice, the suffering and the dying.

It is a necessary reminder because while we may be invited to an occasional mountaintop, we do most of our living down here. It is not easy to know God when you are too busy to catch your breath, when you are running as fast as you can to keep up and falling behind, when you're dealing with lots of ambiguity, the uncertainty of your future, your aging parents, your growing family, or your best friend's sickness or your own obvious mortality. It's not easy to know a transcendent God.

And so it is good to be reminded that God had a hand in what happened to Jesus, that he is the Beloved Son, that he is our savior precisely because in him God has come close and shared our life, suffered with us, and died our death.

Wednesday is the beginning of Lent when those who wish to follow Jesus remember the story as it becomes more and more specific and as we find ourselves drawn into it once again. Peter, you may have noticed, wanted to stay up on the mountain, wanted to build three buildings to nail the experience down, make it permanent. Jesus doesn't even acknowledge that suggestion, but leads his friends down from the mountain, back to the journey of life, a journey now blessed by the assurance that it is lived within the presence and the love of God, a journey that will end on another hill, outside the city, and then — begin again for him — for you and me.

Amen.